Positioning Diversity in Kenyan Schools

von, Malve

Published by African Minds

von, Malve.
Positioning Diversity in Kenyan Schools: Teaching in the Face of Inequality and Discrimination.

Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/101725.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/101725

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=3195379
This book set out to investigate the position of diversity in the Kenyan education and school context. Education is considered key for societies to achieve more social cohesion and justice, as pointed out, for example, in the African Union’s *Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want*. But how are schools and teachers affected by and implicated in the (re-)construction of social differentiations and groups along ethnic, gender, cultural, religious and other lines of difference and in resulting inequalities between them? Kenya is faced with vast disparities in terms of educational access and success – rendering some social groups marginalised and others favoured. In order to identify the specific configurations, representations and encounters of diversity in Kenyan school contexts, the main question to be answered was, therefore, how teachers perceive, experience and deal with diversity in their professional practice.

Using a grounded theory approach, the study found that teachers in Kenyan primary and secondary schools experience diversity as inherently connected to social hierarchies and that their professional practices dealing with diversity include de-hierarchising as well as hierarchising strategies.

The implications for diversity in education in postcolonial contexts include both theoretical and practical conclusions.
Starting with no predefined social categories to look at in particular, the findings highlight the theoretical-conceptual notion of diversity including the social categorisations that affect schools and teachers in Kenya.

The particular configurations of diversity in the Kenyan school context constitute the centre-periphery disparity as a pivotal structural condition of diversity in Kenya. This refers to the geographic and historically developed inequality between urban centres and the rural periphery, the middle-class districts and marginalised and poverty-stricken suburbs. The extremely different living conditions resulting from the spatial diversity affect the schools fundamentally. There are vast inequalities in the availability of resources and infrastructure, and in terms of the ability of families and communities to provide for the basic needs of the learners as a precondition for schooling. In combination with the national standardised education and examination system and school policies, the postcolonial centre-periphery disparity constitutes a decisive structural diversity factor that reproduces colonial othering processes and positions schools and learners in an unequal competition for educational success.

The most significant representations of diversity in the Kenyan school context include: ethnicity, gender, class and normativity related to body and sexuality. The categorising, essentialising and hierarchising discourses and norms follow ethnic lines. A binary gender concept is framed and shaped by patriarchy. The globalised competitive market economy marginalises the majority of the society. Hegemonic religious and cultural belief systems, including heteronormativity and able-bodiedness, create the conditions for the ways in which diversity is perceived and experienced in the schools. Some of the origins of these categorisations date back long into colonial history, yet they are utilised in today’s society to protect distorted power relations by means of tribalism and identity politics, taboos and corruption. Consequently, they also affect schools.

The encounters of diversity in the postcolonial Kenyan school context, meaning the human interactions, relations and professional practices of teachers, are framed by these representations and
configurations of diversity. They enable conditions in which stereotyping, discrimination, othering, prejudice, stigmatisation, exclusion and even violence occur as an expression of conflicts related to redistribution and recognition. At the same time, diversity also frames opportunities for the development of competencies like multi-perspectivity, self-reflexivity, empathy, solidarity and adaptivity. However, based on the multiplicity of settings in which Kenyan schools operate in terms of their positionality in the centre-periphery scenario and in the specific ethno-linguistic and socio-economic environment, the diversity issues emerging as significant for schools and teachers vary widely. Hence, the teachers’ professional practices and schools’ strategies also vary in the way they respond to and accommodate diversity and how they prevent diversity-related conflicts. However, in considering social justice and decolonisation as a perspective for understanding diversity in education in Kenya, the limits of teachers’ and schools’ strategies have become apparent, too. In the often under-resourced and overcrowded schools and classrooms, diversity strategies are mainly developed, ad hoc. Teachers regularly use short-term remedial interventions to support individual learners whose participation in school is threatened altogether, particularly due to poverty, early marriages or special needs. By contrast, some long-term and coordinated strategies actively include diversity issues in the schools’ institutional frameworks, curricula and teaching practices. They refer to the more practical implications for teachers, teacher educators and policymakers.

Based on the conceptual and theoretical findings, the following practical solutions and recommendations aim to strengthen the potential for diversity as a concept in education that helps to transform schooling in Kenya towards nondiscrimination, decolonisation, equality and social cohesion. They are grounded in (i) the analytical model, (ii) the teachers’ and schools’ strategies and (iii) the research participants’ recommendations. It is their objective to change what is experienced as socially imposed hierarchisation and as a vertical ordering system. They thus work towards de-hierarchisation and a more horizontal ordering system of diverse groups.
What has become evident in the developed theory, are the limitations and social boundaries for diversity in education, and the fact that schools and teachers cannot solve larger societal problems per se – even if more resources are provided. While schools and teachers can deal with and attenuate problems of hierarchisation and discrimination, other social and political actors need to actively engage in the agenda to transform systems towards social equality and less hierarchisation. This refers particularly to the identified contextual and causal factors as drivers of hierarchisation in the analytical model. As long as the structural discrimination of learners and schools grounded in the centre-periphery disparity and national education policies (context) continues to frame and reproduce diversity as social inequality, the schools’ and teachers’ scope of action is clearly delimited. Similarly, if tribalism, gender inequality, poverty and sociocultural hegemonic discourses (causal factors) that leave many Kenyan identities marginalised, stereotyped and discriminated against continue to be politically and socially accepted and normalised, the schools’ and teachers’ spheres of influence will remain small. Hence, the recommendations below tackle the contextual and causal factors of the analytical model that need to be abandoned, ameliorated or altered in the medium or long term. The identified de-hierarchising strategies of teachers and schools can therefore be regarded as contributing to the required changes but not as the sole solution to the social problems at hand.

Hence, the recommendations below address not only (a) teachers and principals as target groups, but also (b) teacher education designers and (c) policymakers as well as curriculum developers. In doing so, the drivers and contextual factors affecting diversity in the Kenyan schools are included as well. Yet, they will not be able to be transformed in the short term but, rather, in the medium or long term. These practical conclusions and recommendations are extracted from the teachers’ and schools’ de-hierarchising strategies drawn from the data and presented in the analytical model. However, given the strained and overburdened situation of teachers (including their meagre salaries) the
recommendations targeting teachers and schools should not be misconstrued. In the current under-resourced Kenyan education system, teachers are already placed under numerous pressures and often faced with demands they can barely meet. Keeping this in mind when thinking about recommendations for teachers on how to deal with diversity in their schools means that an implementation of de-hierarchising diversity strategies needs be accompanied by other measures supporting the conditions for change. These recommendations are set out in what follows.

**Considering various backgrounds/identities and creating differentiated learning paths:** The need to acknowledge the diverse backgrounds of learners refers to the innate biological identity determinants and socially constructed or ascribed characteristics and categorisations as well as their lived experiences. These background factors constitute the need for schools and teachers to acknowledge and be generally sensitive towards the diversity of learners and the characteristics and social categories positioning them in relation to schooling and formal education. However, examples from the data point to a general diversity dilemma between affirming and reproducing social categories on one hand and trying to ignore and deconstruct social categorisations on the other. The latter strives to prevent stereotyping and the manifestation of social hierarchies. The ways in which the teachers and schools in this study dealt with the different backgrounds of the learners showcase this problem of categorisations that focus on differences. It might be temporarily necessary in specific schools to keep records of each learner for the purpose of taking background and identity factors into account that could lead to discrimination or stereotyping among the learners. However, this documentation brings with it a somewhat strict and static categorisation strategy that includes the danger of essentialising and reinforcing boundaries.

Teachers also expressed the need for more classifications concerning learners with special needs. Being able to categorise learners with regard to their special needs would be a prerequisite for creating differentiated learning paths and hence, for becoming
inclusive. As shown in this study, disregarding the learners’ backgrounds, including their special needs, tends to exclude learners who do not fit the perceived norm or who do not feel that their particular histories and identities are recognised and appreciated.

**Designing diversity-embracing schools and learning environments:** Including the backgrounds and diversity of characteristics and identities of the learners when designing curricula and teaching resonates with what critical pedagogy regards learning to be. Kincheloe regards learning as a process of constructing new relationships in the interaction of cultural understandings, the influences of the information environment, familiar stories, idiosyncratic ways of making meaning, and schooling (2004: 115).

In this notion of learning as an expanding process and relationship between different knowledges, formal schooling needs knowledge and resource counterparts that are rooted in the lived experiences of the learners. Considering the variety of lived experiences in the nation state of Kenya (including cultural, ethnolinguistic, religious, geographic and health-related factors), schools need to embrace diversity rather than devalue these resources by using curricula and teaching methods that are abstracted from the lived experiences of the learners, to a large extent. This study suggests that knowledges and resources from local contexts and learners need to be actively included and engaged in schools and curricula in order to make learning more meaningful. This will counteract hierarchising and othering processes. How learners’ different backgrounds (e.g. different home languages) can be used as a resource without focusing on the differences and hence, reproducing social categorisations, is a subject for further inquiry (cf. Brock-Utne 2007).

This study also confirmed the perception that heterogeneous school set-ups are conducive for diversity learning and fostering unity, particularly with regard to ethnicity in Kenya. Consistently, the teachers supported the government’s efforts to mix learners and teachers of different ethnic backgrounds in the schools. As one teacher put it, ‘when the students mingle together and they
exchange, somehow unity comes in’ (1:102). In some areas in Kenya, this policy faces difficulties. Here, the teachers confirmed their preference to teach in their own areas. It therefore suggests further research into the question of how social cohesion and unity can be promoted, and stereotypes and discrimination based on ethnicity be eliminated, in schools characterised by diversity as opposed to schools characterised by rather homogeneous set-ups in Kenya. This would include an assessment of the curricula and school books used – with regard to the values and stereotypes transmitted to the learners, as well as narratives that serve as a foundation for fostering a national identity as opposed to different ethnic identities. Because of Kenya’s multi-ethnic and multi-religious context and its history of ethnic violence and discrimination, Alice Nderitu (2018a) has provided a most useful training manual on ethnic diversity and discrimination particularly for Kenyan teachers and educators. Based on the findings of the present study, this comprehensive and human rights-orientated training manual is strongly recommended to be included in teacher education and professional development programmes.

*Sensitive about discrimination and empathising with learners:* The teachers developed ad hoc strategies to avoid stigmatisation and discrimination against specific learners by means of empathising with them:

So we as teachers, first of all, should wear the shoes of those who are being discriminated, try to empathise and feel for them. Then once you have put on that shoe and know how painful it is, you see, now ensure that we get out of that. (6:54)

Apart from ad hoc strategies that depend on individual teachers and their ability to empathise and solve issues of discrimination in their classrooms, schools need institutional strategies to combat discrimination. One such strategy that the teachers reported to be effective was to sensitise learners about discrimination and its consequences and prohibit pejorative and discriminatory terms
and language. In doing so, they mainly relied on support from the guidance and counselling departments of their schools, and invited external resource people, together with the school management, to address the learners. However, teachers were frustrated about the lack of support and willingness of colleagues and school principals to address problems regarding discrimination based on various categorisations as constituting a problem for the whole institution rather than only their classroom.

**Strengthening guidance and counselling services and institutionalising opportunities to file complaints:** A related recommendation resulting from the findings is to strengthen the guidance and counselling departments in terms of resources as well as pedagogically and psychologically skilled staff members. Based on the needs of the specific school, teachers and staff need to be qualified to deal with extra-curricular problems such as discrimination because the teachers are not able to sufficiently engage with these aspects in addition to teaching.

Cases of discrimination, othering and exclusion referred not only to problems among the learners. Female teachers reported severe experiences of discrimination from their male colleagues, which they tried to confront by seeking support from the principal. This left the female teachers dependent on the understanding and goodwill of the principal. A conclusion from this study is that institutionalised opportunities for teachers and learners to file complaints and claim their rights in cases of discrimination must be facilitated.

**Considering diversity in the curriculum:** Further practical recommendations relate to curriculum development as a means to avoid hierarchisation. Teachers identified discrimination in the curriculum in terms of the way specific topics were supposed to be taught (e.g. with regard to HIV-positive learners or learners with albinism). They felt the need to change the contents and ways of teaching in order to not discriminate against, stigmatise or in any way trouble specific learners. This calls on education policymakers and curriculum designers to consider human diversity and
those learners specifically affected when teaching sensitive topics relating to the body, health or sexual orientation. Taboos and stigmatisation were identified as obstacles for embracing a human rights or social justice-based diversity strategy concerning sensitive topics in education like sexuality/sexual orientation, disability, and HIV and Aids education (cf. Karanja 2017; Khau 2012; Khau et al. 2008; Yego 2017). However, commendable initial steps to overcome stigmatisation and taboos through a humanising pedagogy were identified in some of the schools. In addition, further research will be needed to better understand which factors enable or disable talking about tabooed topics in specific school contexts besides the curriculum, as a first step to transform schools towards embracing diversity.

**Devising multiple diversity-cognisant teaching and learning methods**: The findings furthermore suggest that using various learner-centred teaching methods and approaches like creative, arts-based, visual and drama-based methods (cf. Athiemoolam 2018; De Lange et al. 2013; Fichten et al. 2008; Wafula 2017) support inclusion and provide equal chances for learners to participate in lessons. Hence, they should be firmly integrated and applied in schools and other learning environments. Therefore, teachers need to be qualified to use tools to cater for, include and support learners such as those with barely any background in academic pen-and-paper work. Arts-based and creative methods in teaching also help to break silences and taboos around sexuality and disability and hence, need to be explored further as to their potential to change existing oppressive relations. Equipping teachers and principals with practitioner- and action-research methods to identify and develop best practices in their local contexts would provide evidence of what teaching methods work.

**Addressing conflicts**: Teachers need to be able to address conflicts and solve problems around diversity arising in their areas of influence, and to deconstruct boundary-making and underlying issues of power. The teachers in this study drew on their own experiences of being othered and discriminated against growing
up, which made them aware of the ways in which discrimination, prejudice and stereotyping work and how social inequality is reproduced, based on various diversity categories used to legitimise different treatment. These experiences became a useful resource at their command in the classroom. However, teachers need to be willing and able to solve diversity problems and conflicts in the schools – a competency needed for dealing with diversity successfully (see Recommendation 8).

**Qualifying teachers to deal with diversity:** This recommendation emerges from the findings concerning the teacher’s role and the competencies required to deal with diversity in a de-hierarchising manner. It cannot be taken for granted that all teachers bring the same resources and competencies with regard to diversity – such as recognising discrimination and constructively dealing with it to the classroom. These competencies include, among others, multi-perspectivity and the vocabulary to facilitate a discussion about privilege and oppression and oppressive systems (Steyn 2014) and the ability to address and mediate conflicts in a constructive manner. Professional development should address general competencies for dealing with human diversity and difference in nondiscriminatory ways.

**Teachers serving as role models and practising agency/advocacy:** The findings suggest that teachers’ professional identities and the resources they bring to the classrooms and the schools as well as questions of school culture strongly influence the way in which diversity is dealt with. Most of the research participants in this study were highly skilled in self-reflexivity, multi-perspectivity, empathy and communicative competencies – and served as role models for the learners. Therefore, it is essential to see teachers as possessing agency regarding the ability to shape and control their own lives (Kincheloe 2004). In doing so, it is the teachers’ task to advocate for weaker members of society, in this case the learners, when they need support. This brings us back to the introductory statement of this study made by one of the research participants: ‘I always say this: a teacher can change a society’ (7:49).
**Recommendations per target group**

In summary, the recommendations for the three main actor groups targeted by this study include the following:

- Teachers and school principals should try to seek non-stigmatising ways of including the different backgrounds of learners and their lived experiences when teaching. For instance, ways of including the home language and knowledges of learners in enriching, rather than separating, ways of learning and knowing in classroom activities should be explored. Attention should be paid to learners whose background and identity emerges as an obstacle to learning and schooling – not with a deficit perspective on the learner but by asking how the school can accommodate these learners in the best possible way. Applying a variety of learner-centred and creative teaching methods instead of focusing on academic and abstract teacher-centred methods helps to accommodate the learners’ diversity. Problems arising related to diversity in the schools need to be addressed and not ignored. The school leadership is responsible for creating an open and supportive school culture where conflict can be addressed, and solutions found cooperatively.

- Recommendations for teacher education refer first to the need to acknowledge and sensitise teachers about diversity in the context of social inequality in Kenya. At the same time, pre- and in-service teachers need to be made aware of social categorisations and boundary-making as mechanisms to legitimise and justify different treatment based on various oppressive systems, for example, by using Nderitu’s (2018a) training manual *Beyond Ethnicism*, and similar material (cf. Steyn 2014) in all teacher education programmes. Furthermore, various teaching and learning techniques and approaches like creative, arts-based, visual and drama-based methods need to be included in teacher education programmes. For teachers to
understand and be able to assess learners with special needs, diagnostic competencies are needed in teacher education programmes – including strategies to provide differentiated learning paths.

- A detailed strategy for the development of diversity-related competencies of teachers, including professional identity development, should be based on a proper assessment of existing approaches and needs for teacher education. However, strengthening the development of teacher professional identities and personalities beyond training them to teach subject-specific content is recommended. How far this is already happening with regard to teachers and schools dealing with diversity in Kenya, and how successful programmes can be installed, are subjects for further research.

- Recommendations for policymakers and curriculum developers refer to the need to include diversity issues on all levels of teacher education, and create opportunities for teachers in terms of professional development (e.g. based on human rights approaches or critical diversity literacy; Steyn 2014). Furthermore, it is recommended to re-integrate more technical, vocational and arts-based subjects into the school curriculum to unlock the potential of all learners. The existing strategy of creating school environments that are characterised by diversity in terms of mixing learners of various identities and backgrounds is recommended by the teachers to foster social cohesion and unity. School books should be scrutinised to eliminate harmful stereotypes and prejudice transmitted through the content. This also includes identities that are marginalised and othered or silenced through the curricula (based on, for example, gender or sexual orientation). Such a critical project would need to be backed up by laws – in this case, to protect LGBTIQ persons from discrimination. Furthermore, the school curricula should centre on the lived experiences of the learners and leave schools with opportunities to adapt and change curricula and assessments according to their local contexts. Here,
a balance must be struck between common, nationwide narratives and stories for identity development based on the acknowledgement of commonalities, and specific localised stories and narratives rooted in particular group experiences. A discussion on more autonomy concerning school curricula and examination for the counties is advisable so that regional specificities are included and structural othering tendencies attenuated. To include learners with special needs in regular schools, differentiated learning paths need to be created. A strong recommendation that emerged from the data is that the guidance and counselling departments need to be strengthened and better equipped in order to meet the high demand for sociopsychological counselling and support. This would relieve the teachers so that they can concentrate on teaching. Given that discrimination based on gender, ethnicity and health-related issues, among others, is prevalent in many schools, institutionalised opportunities for teachers and learners to file complaints are needed.

What can be learnt from the Kenyan case?

The findings from the Kenyan case might also be relevant to other contexts with similar configurations and representations of diversity formed by colonial history and comparable centre-periphery disparities. Nonetheless, distinctions will need to be made regarding conditions where identity politics and education policies differ as well as representations and encounters of diversity in the school contexts of various postcolonial national states. Similarities also refer to the intention of a diversity-reflexive education that needs to take decolonisation as connected to social justice and equality into account.

Concerning the theoretical debate of group-centred versus system-centred approaches to researching diversity, the implications depicted above suggest that choosing only one approach would not do justice to the complexities of the education context. A strong system-centred focus and its concern with power
relations would neglect the need for societies to recognise and find constructive ways of dealing with actual forms of diversity, inequality and self-ascribed identity. Focusing on social groups and their particular position in the society would not only help reproduce essentialising notions of collective identities, but also neglect the ways in which differences are used to legitimise social inequality. Hence, the findings of this study support an integration of both approaches of researching and dealing with diversity.

In summary, it can be concluded that diversity in the Kenyan school context comes along with hierarchies that confront teachers with a range of different challenges. Diversity in a critical understanding can be a useful concept for analysing the ways in which education participates in the reproduction of social inequalities and re-colonisation, and for identifying strategies and practices that lead to social justice, de-hierarchisation and decolonisation. By contributing to this body of knowledge and providing a contextualised understanding of diversity in education, the book hopes to spark further research, discussions and policy changes towards recognition of diversity and equal chances for all – not only in Kenyan schools.